

## RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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# Teaching about Religion in Public Secondary Schools

*Randle H. Lewis*

**Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education**, Diane L. Moore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007 (ISBN 978-1-4039-6349-9), xvi + 226 pp., pb \$28.95

**Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't**, Stephen Prothero, HarperCollins, 2007 (ISBN 978-0-06-084670-1), vii + 296 pp., hb \$24.95

### *Abstract*

*In the past eight years, religion and religious practices have found renewed interest in understanding world events. In an effort to education the citizenry about these religious traditions several public school districts have added religion courses to their curriculum. To assist educators in this endeavor, Stephen Prothero and Diane L. Moore recently published works dedicated to the teaching of religion in public secondary schools. These works share common themes and aspirations, but differ in the method and implementation of reaching their goals.*

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq a renewed interest in religion and religious practices has permeated the media. A Boolean search of 'religion since 9/11' on Ebsco Host reveals over 217,000 items. The everyday vocabulary of the US citizens has increased to include words such as Jihad, Shilte/Shi'a, Sunni, and Imam, just to name a few. Several public school districts have introduced curriculum focused on explaining the practices and traditions to educate students about the world's religions. In an effort to assist educators in this endeavor, Stephen Prothero and

Diane L. Moore recently published works dedicated to the teaching of religion in public secondary schools. While the works were written independently of one another and released within six months of each other, they share common themes and aspirations, but differ in the method and implementation of reaching their goals. In what follows, the author will briefly survey the two works, point up the similarities and differences in the works, and finally critique both from an educational, religious, and theological standpoint.

Stephen Prothero's contribution to the discussion of teaching religion in public schools is *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – and Doesn't*. Prothero's layout of the book is simple and straightforward – he introduces religious literacy and illiteracy, he identifies the problem, recounts the history leading up to the problem, and then proposes a solution for the problem. He defines the problem as a lack of religious literacy among US citizens. 'Here (in America) faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss'. He continues, 'Americans are both deeply religious and profoundly ignorant about religion . . . [H]ere faith is almost entirely devoid of content' (p. 1). Following the example of E. D. Hirsch in *Cultural Literacy*, Prothero argues that there is a body of 'core religious knowledge' one needs to understand in order to be an 'informed' citizen. He insists that the lack of this knowledge 'is more dangerous because religion is the most volatile constituent of culture, because religion has been, in addition to one of the greatest forces for good in world history, one of the greatest forces of evil' (p. 4). Before addressing the problem of religious illiteracy, Prothero defines religious literacy as 'the ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, themes, and stories that are employed in American public life' (p. 13).

Prothero begins his identification of the problem of religious illiteracy by reviewing statistics of several surveys on American's religious knowledge. One example he sites was, 'when asked whether the Bible locates Jesus' birth in Jerusalem (it does not), only fifty-one percent of Jews surveyed were fooled, while sixty percent of evangelical Protestants got the answer wrong' (p. 31). This, and similar results of American's knowledge of the world's major religions, begs the question of the necessity of religious knowledge, which Prothero sees vitally relevant given the pervasiveness of religion in America's history and culture. 'Religion in American popular culture', he argues, 'is indebted . . . to the collective decision of evangelicals . . . to join modernity rather than fight it' (p. 40). To set this in its historical context, he views the Enlightenment's effects on Protestantism as evolving where '[o]rdinary people took control of their churches . . . the God-fearing faith of Calvinism yielded to the Jesus-loving faith of evangelicalism, and American religion became less intellectual

and more enthusiastic' (pp. 46–7). But Prothero does not blame the problem on evangelicalism alone, he also sees the rise of secularism in the early twentieth century as the other historical component to American's religious illiteracy. Prothero plots four effects of secularism on religion that subsequently influenced how secondary education approached the topic: a move from head to the heart; a move from doctrine to storytelling; a move from the Bible to Jesus; and a move from theology to morality. These effects have further led to an understanding of religion as spirituality which Prothero defines as 'religion stripped down to its experiential dimension. . . . [S]pirituality is do-without-religion, a form of faith that denies its connections to the instructions, stories, and doctrines that gave birth to it – religion without memory' (p. 116).

To solve the problem of religious illiteracy Prothero suggests the implementation of religion courses in American public secondary schools. Following Hirsch's lead, he advocates for using a 'New Consensus' model of teaching religious studies in public schools. He writes, 'This new consensus . . . steers deftly between two extremes: a religious extreme, . . . and a secular extreme. . . . The *via media* here is the "civic public school", which fosters objective teaching about religion while avoiding either denigrating or promoting it' (p. 130). To accomplish this goal, he thinks secondary schools should offer a mandatory 'Bible 101' course with the aim of enabling to 'understand what their elected officials are saying [when they use a biblical reference], to evaluate whether they are reading the Bible correctly or abusing it for partisan political purposes' (pp. 132–3). As a primer for this course, Prothero concludes his text with a 'Dictionary of Religious Literacy' which the mastery of, he suggests, will prepare one 'to engage the controversial social and political issues of our times' (p. 151).

For her contribution to this discussion Diane L. Moore offers *Overcoming Religious Illiteracy: A Cultural Studies Approach to the Study of Religion in Secondary Education*. Moore's text is derived from her many years of directing the Program in Religion and Secondary Education at the Harvard Divinity School. Her motivation for producing this work is the 'lack of understanding [of Americans] about the ways that religion itself is an integral dimension of social/historical/political experience coupled with our ignorance about the specific tenets of the world's religious traditions . . . [which] hinder our capacity to function as engaged, informed, and responsible citizens of our democracy' (pp. 4–5). The aim of her book 'is to give educators, parents, and other citizens tools to begin to overcome this debilitating religious illiteracy' (p. 5). To accomplish this task, Moore divides her work into two parts: the foundations of why and what has caused this illiteracy and what needs to be done to reverse it; and the implementation of her suggestions through practical examples.

Moore begins the first part of her work by discussing the purpose of public education. After reviewing several educational theories, she concludes, 'the purpose of education in our multicultural/multireligious democracy is to foster the skills, values, interest, and confidence in students to be able to participate as active moral agents in the conscious social reproduction of society in its most inclusive form' (p. 24). She then moves to building her argument for the need of including religion in public schools. Moore's premises for this argument include: enhanced understandings in literature and history when 'students are exposed to the foundational literature of the world's religious tradition from a nonsectarian perspective' (p. 29); students with a more 'informed and sophisticated understanding of religion will . . . help diminish discriminatory practices' and help 'all students feel a sense of belonging' (p. 33); and to inhibit the repression 'practiced when sectarian religious perspectives are privileged over other religious and non-religious frameworks in educational settings' (p. 34). She concludes the first part of her work by detailing the process of how teachers have and should teach about religion and how they should be trained in religion.

After setting forth some guidelines for teaching religion, Moore examines several approaches to teaching religion in secondary schools. These included: the Phenomenological Approach, which 'assumes that religious experience is a unique category that cannot be accurately represented . . . through nonreligious frameworks' (p. 68); the Literacy Approach, which applies 'the tools of literary analysis . . . to understand the world created within a given text' (p. 70); the Historical Approach, which 'reinforces the belief that religion is fundamentally separate from other dimensions of human life' (p. 71); and the Multicultural Educational Approaches (pp. 71–8). Yet, Moore favors using a Cultural Studies Approach to teach about religion in public schools. The core features this approach brings to teaching religion for Moore are: (1) it is 'multidisciplinary' and 'requires multiple lenses through which to understand its multivalent social/cultural influences', (2) it 'challenges the legitimacy . . . that human experience can be studied accurately through discrete disciplinary lenses . . . and instead posits an approach that recognizes how these lenses are fundamentally entwined', and (3) it recognizes 'all knowledge claims as "situated" . . . in that they arise out of certain social/historical/cultural/personal contexts' (p. 79). Moore's final step in this process is to address the implications her approach has from a pedagogic standpoint. Her text concludes in Part Two with Moore providing real-life examples of this process in two courses she taught in a secondary institution.

Even with the brief review of the two texts, one can see that there are several similarities between Prothero's and Moore's works. Both authors are convinced that there is no constitutional prohibition for what they are advocating. Each points to the 1963 case of *Abington v.*

*Schempp* where 'the Supreme Court again gave a constitutional seal of approval to the academic study of religion' (Prothero p. 129). In both texts the authors are careful to distinguish between the teaching 'about' religion and the teaching 'of' religion. Moore views this distinction as the former being an academic approach to religion and the latter a devotional approach (p. 6). Each author sees the need for religious literacy as a component for producing an informed citizenry. And both understand that the best place to have this instruction is in public secondary schools. But while they share many similarities, there are major differences separating them.

The first difference between Prothero and Moore is that of background. While both teach in private, New England university settings, Moore spent several years teaching religious studies at the secondary level at Phillips Academy, Andover. Secondary education is as much concerned with how a subject is taught as it is with the subject matter being taught. Moore's work and leadership of the Program in Religion and Secondary Education has expanded her understanding of teaching pedagogies from the elite halls of Phillips to the inner-city public schools of the Boston area. This also might affect the second difference between the two, how they approach the teaching of religion in schools. Prothero desires the addition of another course in the school curriculum while Moore hopes to incorporate the religious teaching in existing courses. To be sure, both will add to the work of teachers, but schools and school districts are more likely to add an additional training conference for teachers than design a new course. A third difference that emerges is one of pedagogy. Moore is quick to point out that she views the Cultural Studies Approach as the best vehicle to transmit religious knowledge in the classroom. Prothero, on the other hand, gives no pedagogical approach other than a required Bible 101 course. Another major difference is that of application. Prothero gives his readers a Dictionary of Religious Literacy but offers no instruction in affectively using it, or how one should set up the required course for which he argues. Moore, however, not only details how her approach should be implemented, but recounts for her readers how she utilized it in two of her own secondary courses. Given the similarities and differences, how should one view these works?

As a former secondary school teacher in religious studies, I found both works informative, affirming, helpful, and incomplete. I, too, experience the religious illiteracy of students on a daily basis. For those of us who teach in this field, regardless the level, this fact has been increasingly evident. Many of us in religious/sectarian environments can only imagine the level of religious illiteracy among public school students (and teachers for that matter). Knowing that the concern for religious literacy has captured the attention of academics like Moore and Prothero should be encouraging, and affirms that there is more to

the debate than proselytization and indoctrination. For teachers concerned with how they teach, Moore's student-centered pedagogy should be a model for which we should strive. Her example of classroom preparation, lesson planning, and flexibility are common place practices in secondary schools across the country that desperately need to become the norm in our colleges and graduate schools.

Yet, both Moore and Prothero do not go far enough for this author. I, like many of my readers, am in the business of teaching religion, not teaching about religion. The authors strip the study of religion from any personal and divine attribute. Prothero admits early in his work that the academy has virtually forgotten that 'the study of religion as an indispensable part of a liberal education' (p. 8). Yet, to my mind, he and Moore perpetuate this reality by insisting that we only teach 'about' religion. As I pointed out early, Prothero sees the effects of the Enlightenment on Protestantism as part of the problem of religious illiteracy. I would argue that it is that same historical phenomena that is at the root of the disappearance of religion as the foundation to the humanities and a liberal arts education. Furthermore, regardless of ones religious beliefs, the practice and understanding of that religion is a personal reality that cannot be objectified in the same way as mathematics. Nor can one ignore the exclusive claims of religion for the sake of tolerance and equality – just as one cannot ignore the exclusive claims of Newtonian physics and Einstein's special theory of relativity. If the goal, as Moore describes it, is to teach students to be critical thinkers, then one cannot disregard the law of noncontradiction. Surely, it is in learning either to accept the contradiction or change one's mind that should be the end of learning.

Both Moore and Prothero have given those serious about teaching religion two good starting points. I could not recommend one over the other but rather think the two works complement each other. Much can be learned and practiced from these texts, and more can be added to them to reform and reenergize religious education in sectarian institutions.

**The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue**, Catherine Cornille, Crossroads, 2008 (ISBN 10-0-8245-2464-0), 265 pp., pb \$24.95

Cornille writes with elegance, clarity and a rich background in Christian theology, European phenomenology (which underpins her approach), and a deep familiarity with Hinduism and Buddhism. Further, she has been involved in interreligious dialogue for many years. All this generates an imaginative and novel approach which will be of interest to readers from any religious tradition interested in dialogue. Cornille's question is both simple and complex: what are the conditions required to make interreligious dialogue flourish? Although she does not spell this out strongly: this question might best be conceived phenomenologically.

Cornille furnishes a simple answer: practioners of dialogue need to develop five virtues that will provide the ideal conditions for fruitful dialogue. What are these virtues? They are humility toward truth, commitment to truth and the journey into it, recognition of interconnection with others and shared common ground, genuine empathy which requires the whole person, and finally, hospitality toward truth. Cornille realizes three important issues as she advances her argument, each chapter in turn taking one of the virtues. First, she realizes that her own Christian tradition is often in serious tension with the virtues enjoined. Second, she realizes that many of the major traditions are in a similar position. Third, she wants to argue that there are resources in her own tradition (and in other traditions) to pursue these virtues in a manner that will ensure genuine development and growth – on Newman-like lines, so that Christianity might better engage in interreligious dialogue.

To give the reader a flavor of the book, I will focus on humility as a sampler. Trawling deftly through many spiritual guides, Cornille shows that humility in the Christian tradition is a cherished virtue in the spiritual life. But humility is severely limited when it comes to claims regarding doctrine. Typically, Cornille explains why this is through careful textual attention. But if there is such an absolutist regard for doctrine, can there be place for interreligious dialogue? Cornille turns to the modern period to dig deeper. She shows how historical consciousness has facilitated recognition of the contextual meaning of doctrine such that its expression and explication are constantly open to development, without relativism or indeterminacy of meaning being smuggled in. This also means that the doctrinal formulations can be open to Indian and Chinese concepts, just as they were initially forged with Hellenistic concepts. And in precisely such inculturation, dialogue must take place. (In this sense, there is a long premodern tradition upon which Cornille could draw). Eschatology also means that the church is growing



constantly into the fullness of truth and does not possess the truth in full. Finally, apophatic theology also guards against the totalizing tendencies of some cataphatic theologies to say it all. Cornille is realistic about the limited form of doctrinal humility that might arise out of the Christian tradition; but even this will be enormously helpful in dialogue. This chapter ends with a sensitive treatment of humility in the religions, especially Buddhism, showing how Christians might learn from Buddhism without in any sense assuming both traditions are up to the same thing.

While all the chapters do not treat their topic in the same form, sometimes giving less attention to Buddhism and other religions, they all test Christian theology against the specific virtue benchmark. Unlike many writers in this area, Cornille sticks to the reality of where religions are rather than demanding they be in some other place. She is patient with a messy and complicated situation, gently pushing the agenda into a fresh arena.

I have two questions to ask of this splendid book. First, the generation of these virtues is never fully explained. They are stated and then tested against the traditions. They have a certain common-sense aura about them, but they are never theologically and philosophically justified as sufficient conditions for interreligious dialogue. Second, when a tradition calls into question how far they might go regarding a virtue for dialogue – as with humility (but the same could be said of all), it is not clear why Cornille does not actually modify the virtue in the light of the Christian tradition rather than allow the virtue to seemingly stand over and above theological discourse. The relation between phenomenology and theology requires clarification, or might one even cast these virtues as part of Aquinas' plea for normal human development and give them a more theological coloring? None of these questions detract from the learning and wisdom of the author, but are small testimony to the stimulating nature of her thesis.

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**The Nature and the Name of Love – Religion for the Contemporary World**, Martin Forward, Epworth Press, 2008 (ISBN 978-0-7162-0637-8), xii + 212 pp., \$26.99

It was often remarked when I was at theological college that a student's denominational allegiance could be detected from how she



began an essay. The Evangelical Anglican invariably began with scripture, the Anglo-Catholic with a quote from TS Eliot, and the Methodist with a Wesley hymn. The title of this work is taken from what Martin Forward describes as one of Wesley's greatest hymns and it will come as no surprise, therefore, to discover that the author is indeed a British Methodist.

This brings me immediately to what I consider one of the book's strengths and weaknesses: this book comes out of thirty years or more of reflection on the major issues facing religion today, and it is obvious that this has occurred from the 'inside'. Martin Forward makes no attempt at depersonalization, as if his particular experiences can be made universally applicable. In this, he is attempting to work out what he considers his main thesis, namely 'to rescue the notion that God has a place in religious studies' (p. vii) but writing from a faithful perspective. Forward invites the reader on what might be described as a literary pilgrimage and helpfully avoids the trap of a spiritual 'how to' manual – 'you, too, can be as spiritual as I'.

This brings me to the potential weakness: is it too Methodist? Might there be the danger that it falls between two stools, where a Methodist reader is not given enough and a non-Methodist too much? While advertizing this as a specifically Methodist or Wesleyan contribution to the debate might have limited its appeal to a general market, I feel it would have been more honest and allowed the author a real chance both to explore and challenge his own community. But, I am overstating the point.

The book is a delightful mixture of almost blunt challenge and poetic reminiscence, evidenced by chapter headings such as 'Has religion a future?' and 'Journeys end in lover's meeting'. In the opening chapter, the author takes on Western skepticism and its poster boys, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. He challenges the Eurocentric view of inevitable secularization in the wake of technological advance and argues that the critiques offered by Hitchens and Dawkins are 'tone deaf' to the complexities of the music emanating from the world's faiths. This is not the usual defensive offering of a religionist on the back foot, however. There is plenty of 'self'-criticism and calls for reform of outdated practices and beliefs.

The call for reformation is a dominant theme throughout the book with Chapter 2 opening with a scathing attack on theological education and therefore on leadership in the Christian Church. There is also a real attempt to deal with three of the thorniest issues in the history of religion – violence, truth, and pluralism. But the highlight for this reviewer comes in the fourth chapter's discussion of mysticism as an often overlooked aspect of religious and spiritual life which, for the author, is actually the very heart of religious life. His definition is broad indeed – 'being transformed by life's deepest meanings' (p. 108) – but I

am not entirely convinced that either John Wesley or the Prophet Mohammed would have classed themselves as mystics. However, Forward sets forth a compelling case for mysticism as both communion with God and a way of knowing beyond knowledge and arrives at his *cri de coeur*, namely that religion must be studied, critiqued, and lived as a relationship with transcendent reality. His ability to draw from Christian and Muslim sources means that this section is rich with meaning and, in places, deeply moving.

There is much to commend this book, not least its elegant prose and passionate reasoning, and readers will find plenty to encourage and challenge. However, if criticism were to be leveled, it would be that the book is long on analysis of the problems and short on possible solutions. Take the two issues of interfaith dialogue and Christian worship. In the case of the former, it would have been hugely helpful to have a fuller exploration of what might constitute proper dialogue, rather than the rather fleeting reference to a ‘“dialogue of life” that does not shirk difficult questions’ (p. 170). Concerning worship, many will agree with the call to stop tinkering with the language of old hymns, but why was the paucity of decent modern contributions to the hymnody not seriously discussed?

This book will offer the thoughtful reader much to ponder, and help believer and nonbeliever alike to a greater awareness and understanding of the contemporary world and the place of religion in it.

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**The Gift of Responsibility: The Promise of Dialogue among Christians, Jews, and Muslims**, Lewis S. Mudge, Continuum, 2008 (ISBN 978-0-8264-2839-4), xiii + 313 pp., pb \$19.95

In this original, substantial, and meticulously argued contribution to the literature on interfaith dialogue, Christian theologian and ethicist Lewis Mudge makes an impressive entry into the interreligious field after long service in the ecumenical. He addresses specifically the three Abrahamic faiths, about which more later. More specifically within, and perhaps beyond, these faiths, Mudge essays to include the ‘rooted cosmopolitans’ of our world.

After posing in a lengthy introduction a paradox of religion in today’s world – as a frequently violent force on the one hand but an even more frequent factor for peace and personal/societal enrichment

on the other – Mudge contrasts also the relative marginalizing of religion by modernity with some of postmodernity's liberating effects on it (especially its attention to specifics and differences). He then sets the stage for his proposals by describing the state of the art of Abrahamic interfaith dialogue: '[Members of the Abrahamic faiths] have built on, and moved beyond, history-of-religions scholarship, beyond dialogue about practices and beliefs, beyond mutual spiritual exploration, even beyond internal debates about how such relationships can be justified (all of which need to continue), to various kinds of substantive ongoing relationships that involve specific mutual responsibilities and commitments' (p. 2).

In Chapter 1, 'Exploring the Lay of the Land', of Part One, 'Abrahamic Communities and the Traumas of Modernity', Mudge repeats his emphasis that present interfaith initiatives make hope possible, and begins to sketch his central proposal of rigorous Abrahamic scriptural dialogues as 'a gift of responsibility' to be exercised by those who are, in Kwame Anthony Appiah's sense, 'rooted cosmopolitans' (p. 47). Chapter 2, 'Public Religions in the Modern World', endorses with guarded approval Jose Casanova's book of the same name as demonstrating that privatization of religion has by no means been a necessary consequence of secular modernity.

In Chapter 3, 'The "Modern Project:" How We Got This Way and What Can Be Done About It', the overemphasis given by Locke, Adam Smith, and others to human autonomy and the social contract is critically balanced against both 'ordinary' and, especially, 'complex' or 'transcending' types of responsibility. Chapter 4 then presents the methodological key to Mudge's proposed dialogues: 'Parallel and Interactive Hermeneutics', a sophisticated way of studying scriptural passages, especially those which occur in all three religions and bear upon the same narrative matter.

'Part II: Dimensions of Abrahamic Discourse' begins with Chapter 5's exercise, 'Reading Scriptures Together: Obedience and Responsibility in the Abraham Narratives'. This chapter impressively demonstrates what 'parallel and interactive hermeneutics' is by three examples: Farid Esack's application of liberation theology to Islamic thought in the context of South Africa's struggle against apartheid, Peter Ochs' scholarly movement, 'Scriptural Reasoning' as Therapy for Modernity's 'Failed Logic' (topic heading, p. 123), and ethicist William Schweiker's 'creative reflexivity between cultures' (p. 127). The important collective aspects of such interactive thinking are presented in Chapter 6, 'Communities of Covenantal Virtue', in terms of three virtues, 'Forgiveness, Trust, Solidarity'. And Chapter 7 works at a 'Political Philosophy for an Abrahamic Public Presence'.

The third and final part, titled 'For All the Families of the Earth', begins daringly with a chapter on 'Civil Society and Social Contracts in

Israel-Palestine'. Chapter 9 then reprises, harvests, and concludes the major themes under the title 'Toward a Covenantal Humanism'.

Mudge's central idea, expressed concisely in his title, is: covenant is gift of and responsibility for the blessing of all people. That rooted cosmopolitans, especially of the three Abrahamic faiths, join in covenant with one another – a covenant which shall not only bless them but by which all the nations of the earth 'shall be blessed' and 'shall bless themselves' (Gen. 12.3 and 22.18) is both gift and responsibility – and the great opportunity of these times. Mudge's sophisticated covenant is one of 'resistance to totalization' in Levinas' sense, and of 'renewal toward a more just social framework' (both p. 145), among other things. And perhaps the book's best self-summary runs: 'The call to membership in each faith community implies a call to obedience to its moral laws. This lays upon us the spiritual gift of responsibility to be part of the community of interpreters through the centuries, including the present century, in which the traditions begin to interact with one another' (p. 171).

And Mudge sees forgiveness, trust, and solidarity among the partners and their religions as fleshing out what he means by 'covenantal' (pp. 183–4). In further argumentation defiant of summary, Mudge speaks of certain responsibilities as 'transcending' (p. 105) – that is, not allowing one *not* to act. And a 'parallel and interactive hermeneutics of responsibility' among the three faiths involves telling each other what is wrong, repenting of one's part in it, and sharing stories that can help right it (p. 136). But Mudge responsibly recognizes that problems today no longer fit comfortably within the range of the religions' traditions, since 'sins of whole religious communities against one another' (p. 192) had not been subject matter discussed by traditions before, but need to be discussed now. Again, nuance is lost here in summary. Mudge's prose, though dense, is not inaccessible, but clear and good English – an American version of British churchman, Islamicist, and stylist Kenneth Cragg, perhaps?

By way of criticism of this overall very positive contribution, I would say that Mudge's degree of initial suspicion about Casanova's conclusions forgets the pervasive post-Vatican II Catholic commitment to reading the 'signs of the times' and acting on them – particularly in matters of freedom of religion and democratization. And in Chapter 7, the lions' share of attention given to Rawls and Habermas on political philosophy proved – rightly, I think – fruitless, leaving less space for William O'Neill's well-conceived language of human rights with mutual respect and specificity (pp. 242–3) and Michael Walzer's helpful 'thick and thin' considerations (pp. 244–7). And finally, a big question that Mudge does ask (pp. 4, 25) but perhaps has answered wrongly: can one leave out of this dialogue (at least) the great Asian religions of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism? Granted that

the more fully shared traditions of the Abrahamic religions provide a strong make-sense-right-now basis for urgent dialogue, would the shunting aside of the Asian (and other) religions not prove to be a marginalization of them as to both time devoted and value recognized? I fear so. But both projects are huge and daunting, and so necessary that the most urgent thing is to act. Mudge has shown us how to do so intelligently.

As to the book's proper audience: negatively, it is required reading for those who think dialogue cannot be intellectually and critically rigorous, and positively, it is helpful for those who claim dialogue can be so, but need manifold arguments as well as inspiration. And it would be a most appropriate textbook for graduate courses on interreligious relations.

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**Desire, Market and Religion**, Jung Mo Sung, SCM Press, 2007 (ISBN 978-0-334-04141-2), xii + 159 pp., £19.99

In this recent addition to the SCM Press's 'Reclaiming Liberation Theology' Series, Korean-born Brazilian theologian Jung Mo Sung offers bracing and provocative reflections on the emerging character and potential contribution of Latin American Liberation Theology in the context of contemporary global change and economic interconnectivity.

Series coeditor Ivan Petrella identifies Sung, 'a Roman Catholic layperson' who serves as 'a professor in the graduate programme in religion at the Methodist University of São Paulo, Brazil', as 'one of the most prolific and influential of a new generation of Latin American theologians'. Despite his strong reputation in Latin America, Sung's 'work remains largely ignored in the North Atlantic academy' (p. xi). As Petrella suggests, the publication of *Desire, Market and Religion* is noteworthy because it is the first of Sung's twelve books to become available to an English-speaking readership (p. xi).

The book consists of six chapters, the first four of which are revised versions of articles previously published (in Portuguese) in the mid-1990s; an original Brazilian form of the book subsequently appeared in 1998 with only these four chapters. Sung describes this first part of the book as being concerned 'directly with the relation between desire, market and religion in capitalist society'. Although the four chapters are independent of one another, Sung justifiably sees them 'form[ing] a

coherent and complementary set, analyzing the subject from several perspectives' (p. 4). For the English publication, two additional chapters (written in 2003 and 2006) were added. This second section 'analyses new challenges for Liberation Theology after the collapse of the socialist bloc and in the face of new economic and social realities and the evolutions, achievements and setbacks of communities and social movements' (p. 4).

*Desire, Market and Religion*, though short in length, presents a formidable theological assessment of contemporary economic ideology and practice. Taking a cue from the work of theologian Rubem Alves (see p. 1) and reflecting on the 'Marxian intuition of the relationship between economics and theology' (p. 2), Sung seeks to link the three issues highlighted in title of the book: 'If one of the functions of commodities is to satisfy a fancy, a desire, and if the satisfaction of the most fundamental desires of human beings has to do with religion, it is probable that there is a relation between desire, commodity and religion' (p. 2). As Sung reminds us, 'Capitalism . . . is an economic system centered on desire, not on the desire of profit by managers but fundamentally on the desire of consumers. Profit is a consequence of efficiency in satisfying the consumer's desire. It is because they know so well how to manipulate and satisfy the consumer's desires that capitalism and its defenders happen to get so much support' (p. 3). Thus, Sung suggests, there is a relationship between the market and theology that is critical to explore '[i]f we want to understand a little better this fascination generated by the market system, and from there if we want to try to neutralize it in the best possible way . . . ' (p. 3). With regard to this 'market-theology relation', we must ask whether Christianity has 'any specific and relevant contribution to make to this debate' (p. 3). Much of Sung's book is devoted to wrestling with that very question, and it provides a fascinating and often compelling read.

Given that much of Sung's project in this book seems to be rooted in the issues and themes highlighted in the first chapter, 'Theology and Economics: An Introductory Vision', it may be worthwhile to summarize his observations there at some length. One of Sung's primary concerns is to counter the widespread notion that 'there are no theological questions in economics'. On the contrary, he argues, 'economic science is grounded, as all sciences, on certain philosophical assumptions, and even more so, on theological and metaphysical assumptions' (p. 10). Sung spends the rest of the chapter seeking 'to unmask the theology implicit in the current international economic order' (p. 11), drawing on 'neoliberal economists and neoliberal theoreticians' (p. 19) in order 'to show that capitalism is grounded in a perverse mythic-religious logic' (p. 20) that 'is not an invention of theologians' (p. 19). For example, with respect to progress, Sung argues, 'Capitalism is presented as the implementer of the promises that Christianity made

for life after death' (p. 14); such a view requires 'immense faith' of a religious nature (p. 15). Sin consequently involves contravention of market 'laws'; that is, 'Evil is wanting to do good, thus wanting to direct, or intervene in, the market'. Sung suggests that here 'we have a complete inversion of the love commandment. To love is not to be in solidarity any more with those who suffer, but to defend one's self-interest in the market (competition in the market) and to avoid the temptation to do good' (p. 16). Moreover, contemporary capitalism has a religious view of sacrifice: 'To the extent that one believes that the capitalist market system is this unique way, without any alternative, all is justified and legitimized in the name of the market' (p. 17). Ultimately, 'The sufferings and deaths of the poor, to the extent that they are considered the other side of the coin of the "redeeming progress", are interpreted as necessary sacrifices for this same progress' (p. 18). Sung counters such 'theological' assumptions latent in economic thought and practice by pointing to the 'critique of idolatry' inherent in 'faith in the resurrection of Jesus' (p. 23) – which he describes as 'an "epistemological revolution"' (p. 25). Such a revolution is required in order for us to pursue 'an economy geared to the elimination of poverty' that 'would emphasize job creation and better income distribution as central criteria for economic and political decisions, whether on a national or global level' – as contrasted with a contemporary 'economic model geared to generating a maximum of wealth to be concentrated (as usual) in fewer hands' (p. 7). The latter model, despite widespread claims to the contrary, is no less rooted in theological assumptions and faith than is the former.

Subsequent chapters treat similar issues – such as the effectively religious function of sacrifice in contemporary market ideologies – but they approach relationship between desire, market, and religion in different ways. In the second chapter, for example, Sung explores how the contemporary market framework cultivates 'mimetic desire' in terms of consumption by providing religious assumptions that necessitate participation in the system. In the third chapter, he turns to the questions of scarcity and 'social exclusion' – raising again the religious assumption of 'necessary sacrifice' that justifies radical inequality. Over against market idolatry, he suggests, 'we must recover the value of solidarity and equality' (p. 73). The fourth chapter continues to address contemporary 'challenges' facing Christians in relation to religion and economics.

The final two chapters in the book explore difficult issues that face Latin American Liberation Theology if it hopes to be relevant in the changed economic and theological milieu in which it finds itself. Chapter 5 explores the interplay 'between the desire for abundance and the reality of scarcity', especially as that effects concrete efforts for justice in solidarity with the poor. In the final chapter, Sung critiques



the 'utopian' assumptions that characterized much of previous liberationist thought in Latin America. He suggests that 'the value and validity of Liberation Christianity are not based on its promise to build utopia but on the justice of the struggle itself' (p. 146). One of the primary challenges for Christians today is determining how to respond to human suffering once we realize that establishment of a utopia is beyond what we can expect. According to Sung, suffering must not be skirted or minimized even by theological systems which, like other theoretical frameworks, 'in order to get closure as a system of thought, ... negate the reality and drama of human suffering, especially the suffering of innocents' (p. 152). In the end, 'The only way for us to avoid the temptation of modernity to reduce all the mysteries of life to a scientific or theoretical problem to be solved is to remain in anguish before the suffering of the innocent and the insoluble crisis provoked by the reality of evil and the confession of faith in a God who is love and freedom. Life has mysteries – like the mystery of evil – which are not reducible to theoretical explanations' (p. 152).

Sung's work may go a long way toward drawing North Americans into deeper constructive dialogue with liberation thought, although this is by no means his primary concern. Despite his strident critique of market idolatry, readers distrustful of liberation theology will not find anything resembling a stereotypical Marxian reading of capitalism. For example, Sung cautions against wholesale rejection of market economics – an approach that characterized some of his earlier Latin American Liberation Theology colleagues. He states, 'first of all, and to avoid any misunderstanding, it must be clarified that the critique of the idolatry of the market does not mean a critique of the market as such, but only of its sacralization, namely of the absolutizing of its laws. One must be careful lest the critique of the sacralization of the market laws take us to the extreme of the same logic, which is its demonizing' (p. 71).

This is an important and complex book that merits attention from all who deal with questions related to Christianity and economics. Although some readers will inevitably find things in Sung's approach and arguments to critique, his incisive analysis and prodigious intellect are enjoyable to engage – and the vast majority of his argument is persuasive for this reviewer. Sung's sensitivity to the dangers of idolatry inherent in systematization is particularly noteworthy. *Desire, Market and Religion* is a challenging, complex, and very welcome contribution that deserves a wide readership.

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